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Trends. Why Humanitarian Workers Should be Killed: A Perspective From Nietzschean Slave Morality

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses different views of the murders of United Nations humanitarian workers in Iraq – first, from a modern Western perspective, and, second, from the perspective of Friedrich Nietzsche as he considered the transvaluation of what is Good on the part of the powerless.

The recent terrorist murders of United Nations (UN) personnel engaged in humanitarian work in Iraq have generated horror and incomprehension about the motives behind such an atrocity. After all, the murdered were trying to help people, not hurt them.

Beyond the horror and incomprehension, many analysts have evolved to the cold comprehension of instrumental terrorist rationales—viz., (1) the prevention of United States (US) success in stabilizing and establishing a democratic Iraq and (2) defeating the putative US war against Islam. Political psychologists also claim that humanitarian workers cannot remain neutral in the eyes of various sides to a struggle because of social cognitive phenomena such as the fundamental attribution error that can exemplify the dynamic of making negative attributions towards observed actors more intensely than the situation in which they act. Still other explanations focus on the humanitarian engagement in activities that (1) unintentionally exacerbate suffering and dependency and (2) induce a panopticon vehicle that ensures mass media coverage of what certain perpetrators of violence would rather not have covered. Almost all these analysts and psychologists are vouching for the privileged status of humanitarian workers as blameless and worthy only of our sympathy and respect.

A Nietzschean take on the murdered humanitarian workers could be quite different. One common interpretation culled from different analyses throughout Nietzsche's writing career could suggest that the humanitarian workers are the real aggressors and that the terrorists are only fighting in self-defense. The rationale for this interpretation lies in the alleged historical subversion, turning around, and transvaluation of what is Good on the part of the powerless.

According to a Nietzschean take, Good initially related to a noble elite who possessed power, hardiness, a creative spark, and the inclination to revel in these characteristics even if reveling could harm others outside the elite. The people of the non-elite—by virtue of their relative powerlessness—were not able to directly challenge the elite. Moreover, the non-elite's very essence was termed by the elite to be Bad as in not-Good. Leaders of the non-elite—more specifically, individuals who somehow possessed a combination of capability and motivation to confront the noble elite through becoming leaders of the non-elite—ingeniously and, perhaps, insidiously developed a unique and formidable weapon. This weapon was propagandistic in nature—by word and by deed—and communicated the contrary notion that (1) the Good applied to the weak, the ascetic, the poor, and the powerless and (2) the Bad (now termed the Evil) applied to all that was once noble and Good.

This weapon as psychological assault was and has been successful in two ways. The majority of humans making up the original Bad could now perceive everything that made up their Badness as the Good. And the minority of humans making up the noble elite as Good could now be more easily put on the

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defensive in a power conflict. In fact, members of the noble elite could now experience enough shame, guilt, and even fear so as to voluntarily share or give up the power of the powerful—and intriguing apotheosis of Havel's construct of the power of the powerless.

Now let's return to a Nietzschean take on humanitarian workers. Their activities are but examples of the onslaught of the powerless against the powerful—an eternal recurrence of this onslaught. A Nietzschean take on the murders of UN personnel is that of the power of the powerful overcoming, for the moment, the power of the powerless. This take should not necessarily be taken necessarily as an apology of or support for the terrorist murders. However, the notion of the blamelessness of humanitarian workers may be one that is a product of reifying certain intentions and behavior labeled as helping of others—a helping that also is helping the power of the self. In the aftermath of carnage, such a take is often perceived as unwelcome, insensitive, and immoral. It also may be closer to the world in which we live. (Alford, C.F. (1999). A psychoanalytic study of evil. *American Imago*, 56, 27-52; Eigen, M. (1995). Moral violence: Space, time, causality, definition. *Melanie Klein & Object Relations*, 13, 37-45; Gnepp, E.H. (1977). Radicals, revolution, psychology and society. *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 14, 46-53; Havel, V. (1986). The power of the powerless. In J. Vladislav, (Ed.). *Living in truth*. Faber and Faber; Nietzsche, F. (1968). *Toward a genealogy of morals*. In W. Kaufmann, (Ed.). *The portable Nietzsche*. Viking.) (Keywords: Iraq, Nietzsche, Terrorism, United Nations.)